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Contest Reveals What Sites Can Do

BYLINE: By STEPHANIE SCHOROW

With so many search engines to choose from, how do they compare? The Herald asked two groups of Web surfers to test five major search engines or portals - Google, Yahoo, Lycos, Ask Jeeves and AlltheWeb - for speed in an informal trivia contest

The first round was held late last year among participants in the Technology Goes Home program of the Codman Square Technology Center in Dorchester; the second was held earlier this year among ninth-graders at the TechBoston Academy in Brighton.

Participants were divided into teams and assigned a specific search engine to answer such questions as "What does al-Qaeda mean in Arabic?" "What is Britney Spears' shoe size?" "What year did the 'Star-Spangled Banner' become the national anthem for the United States?" "Who wrote the theme music for 'Jeopardy?'" and "What is the normal resting pulse rate for an adult?"

The first person to call out the correct answer won for his-her team. Participants were required to find the answer on line, even if they thought they already knew it. Teams also switched search engines periodically.

When Lycos and Yahoo, both Web portals, were pitted against each other, Team Lycos came out ahead slightly more often. Team Google, however, always bested AlltheWeb, Yahoo and Lycos. TechBoston ninth-graders tested Google against Ask Jeeves and Team Google came out slightly ahead.

Participants and testers learned one important point: If you can't spell, you can't search. Because "Afghanistan" proved difficult, most participants were stumped by the question: "You've heard that there is a great Afghanistan restaurant in Cambridge. What is the name of the restaurant?"

Search engines "need to have spell check," said TechBoston ninth-grader Erika Gonsalves.

Other participants lost precious time when they came up with wrong answers due to wrong information posted on Web sites; this was found with questions like: "How old was Martin Luther King when he died?" and "Of the 13 original colonies, which was the last state to ratify the Constitution?"

What became apparent was that Web skills were more important to successful searches than the specific search engine used; several participants, such as TechBoston ninth-graders Latiquia Braxton and Andre Lee and Codman Center contestant Christopher Freeman, 13, of Charlestown, consistently came up with the right answer first no matter which engine they used. Braxton personally preferred Yahoo because "it was fast and accurate" and Lee liked Google.

Personal skills also played a role in effective searching. Rita Lopes, 71, of Jamaica Plain, had never before used Google, but she was the first to come up with a recipe in answer to this question: "You have only frozen hamburger meat, potatoes, cans of soup, eggs and mustard in the house. Find a recipe that uses at least three of these ingredients."

While Ask Jeeves did not fare well against Google, several students said they liked the format, which lets them do a search in the form of a question. AlltheWeb was not popular among students; one even said the site "looked boring." Coincidentally, last week AlltheWeb unveiled a cleaner, more streamlined and colorful interface.

But no question went unanswered, even those that required spelling skills. Most answers were found within 30 seconds.

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